War can be considered the one constant factor in the evolution of humankind from the earliest cave dwellers to the current iteration of the species, some of whom have become space travellers. This fundamental aspect of the progression of the human race has also defined the development of warfighting capabilities—both offensive and defensive—and the gradual evolution of a dedicated body of people who ensured the protection of their own population through the employment of force. Such bodies, which today we would describe as military forces, have been an integral part of society since the beginning of recorded history. The inane tendency of human beings to inflict pain and suffering on others and covet their material wealth have made it necessary for nascent states to develop and maintain military forces, leading further to the evolution of a plethora of strategies, operational concepts, and tactics to protect their interests.

By the time the first cohesive kingdoms were formed around the Mediterranean Sea, the power of a nation was primarily determined by its military might; its ability to enforce its will over other entities in combination with its ability to protect its citizens. Thereafter, for the next two millennia and beyond, military forces have remained a pillar of national power. The capability resident in a military force has evolved over these years and a contemporary modern military force is a far cry from those that were previously considered efficient, for example the military forces of the ancient Greek city-states.

Military forces were also the foundation on which empires were built. The Roman Empire, undoubtedly the greatest empire of ancient times, was built and thrived on the strength of the unbeatable marching legions that they were able to field. Essentially undefeated land power was the ultimate expression of national might. Over the years, nation-states with credible military forces extended their interest to the high seas with the British Empire, where the sun never set, establishing itself as the preeminent Empire of the time based on its ability to control the seas and hence global trade. This required constant policing of the high seas. While the colonies were subdued and controlled through the use of composite army units built for purpose, it was the Royal Navy that dominated the global seas, showing the flag and coercing recalcitrant states to tow the imperial line laid down in London.

The dawn of the 20th century heralded the arrival of air power as an instrument of war that changed the conduct of war and forever altered these ‘older’ realities. Although it was only a supporting element in determining the final outcome, World War I demonstrated how the potential of military air power would become a critical capability in future wars. During the interwar years its efficacy in more nuanced aspects of power projection came to be understood and selectively applied. The British Colonial Office, headed by Winston Churchill, made the Royal Air Force responsible for containing the uprisings that were taking place in the newly created administrative divisions on the coast of the Persian Gulf—Mosul, Baghdad and Basrah. In 1921, the RAF carried out what came to be called ‘air policing’ to bring the volatile native tribesmen under control. The
protocol was fairly simple—demands were made of the tribes; if not complied with then, leaflets were dropped to warn them (although most of them could not read); and then attacks were carried out from the air. While the destruction that could be brought to bear was minimal, it worked.

In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, an identical containment strategy was adopted in the same region—the Northern and Southern Watch operations carried out by Allied air power. With the experience of several major conflicts to draw upon, it could be said that the basis of military power had by this time shifted to air power. Today, the power of a nation is still measured in part by its military might. For example the military capabilities of the most powerful nation in the world, the USA, is underpinned by air power. As a corollary, the strength of modern military forces is characterised, to a large extent, by the breadth of its air power capabilities. It underpins the nation’s ability to ‘reach out and touch’ and reinforces the manner in which it keeps the peace and fights its wars.

Air power, normally resident in all three domain-centric Services that combine to form a modern military force, is the one single capability that all other combat capabilities rely on for effectiveness. They are integral to the warfighting capabilities of a modern military force, as cannons were to the 19th century armies and navies, or cavalry to the Alexandrian Army. A naval task force cannot hope to operate unmolested without control of the air, provided either by an integral fleet air arm or by the air force of the nation. The army is also reliant on air power to give it unprecedented mobility and firepower on land, while the Special Forces function best when they are inserted, sustained and extracted by air power.

In an abstract manner it can be stated that today air power can destroy any fixed target on the earth. It can physically eliminate all adversaries and in an extreme example, it has the capacity to destroy an entire nation. This capability also indicates one of its major weakness. In the contemporary world, large-scale destruction is not compatible with political correctness and the ideals of proportionality and discrimination. Therefore, if the ultimate objective is victory through coercion and limited punishment, air power is likely to fall short, especially when the adversary is aware of the constraints under which air power is being applied. This situation almost always demands intervention on the ground.

Historically, there are examples of air power achieving the desired end-state without having to resort to a ground war, as its destructive power alone has sufficed. The firebombling and finally the atomic bombing brought Japan down to its knees without a ground invasion; coercive punitive raids in Libya curtailed terrorist activities of the regime; and the US-led NATO air campaign in 1999 made Serbia retreat from Kosovo, which ended almost a decade of civil war. If the objectives are carefully defined in a focused manner and the political will of the nation does not wane, air power will be able to achieve it.

In cases where air power was not able to singularly triumph and realise the desired objective, as was the case of Germany in World War II and the Vietnam War, it can be argued that inadequate equipment in the first case and inordinate political constraints in the second skewed both air campaigns. This argument is perhaps only partially true. The ‘will’ of a people to resist cannot, even today, be correctly assessed and therefore surgical destruction of centres of gravity may not be sufficient at all times to achieve the laid down objectives. A joint campaign, where all elements play coordinated roles, is the only answer to the challenges that emerging complexities in the conduct of a campaign will invariably bring up.

Irrespective of the Service-centricity of the capability, there is no doubting that air power now underpins the effectiveness of any modern military force—without air power a military force is highly unlikely to prevail on the land, sea or air.

**Key Points**

- A military force is an indelible pillar of national power
- Air power, normally resident in all three domain-centric Services that combine to form a modern military force, is the one single capability that all other combat capabilities rely on for effectiveness.
- Air power underpins the success of modern military forces.